

Press Release

Demeter International, Brussels, 03.03.2009

Conference “The Science of Sustainable Agriculture: An Innovative Paradigm”

European Parliament, Brussels, March 3, 2009

Demeter International, the Institute for Science in Society (ISIS, London) and the European Greens/EFA (MEP David Hammerstein) invited for a conference about Science and Sustainability. Keynote speakers were Hans Herren, Vice President of the International Agricultural Assessment of Agricultural Knowledge, Science and Technology for Development (IAASTD), Stephan Albrecht, the President of the Federation of German Scientists (VDW) and Marco Schlueter, Director of the IFOAM-EU group. Critical suggestions on the topic science and sustainability were coming from Marie-Hélène Aubert (MEP), Mae Wan Ho (ISIS) and Gunver Kienle, Institute for Applied Epistemology and Medical Methodology.

Complementary scientific approaches were presented by Prof. Ton Baars University of Kassel, Karl Josef Mueller as a cereal breeder and Machteld Huber from the Louis Bolk Institute in the Netherlands. Last but not least Victor Gonzalv ez P erez from Sociedad Espanola de Agricultura Ecologica - SEAE, Valencia, Spain, highlighted the special needs of organic farming research methodologies in Mediterranean Countries. Aim of the conference was to start a dialogue with the European Institutions about research methodologies in the light of sustainability. The Directorate-General for Research of the European Commission was represented by Ciaran Mangan, Deputy Head of Unit for Agriculture Forestry, Fisheries and Aquaculture Research.

The main topic of the conference raised the question: To reach more sustainability in the light of the Goeteborg-Agenda - what research methodologies are needed? The conference followed the line: if organic farming stands for one of the most sustainable forms of agriculture - what sort of research methodologies are combined with it? And can this - different to common - research methodologies stand exceptionally for overall more sustainable research approaches?

As Hans Herren from IAASTD pointed out formal Agricultural Knowledge, Science and Technology (AKST) has produced too many unintended side effects on the environment and societal items. Business as usual is no longer an option. Especially multifunctional farming is completely different to any technical production. Agriculture is systemic! The IAASTD came to the conclusion that today`s AKST at least needs be complemented by indigenous knowledge and more participatory research approaches, if it shall meet future demands of hunger and climate change. 25 million  , which were spent on organic farming research the recent years by the EU “ are only a drop in a bin”. Society should *invest* in sustainability! Stephan Albrecht (Federation of German Scientists - VDW) compared today`s situation with the tower building of Babylon. - Too many specialised scientists talk too many different languages. Technologies can solve problems, but can create ever new ones as well. Science would always be in connection to its societal surrounding. The gap between industrial oriented research and nature protection must be overcome in the future.

Marco Schlueter (IFOAM-EU) referring to the newly established “Technology Platform Organics” highlighted the challenges multifunctional agricultural models face today, as for example the ecofunctional intensification. As in the context of sustainability, ethical farming, trade and consumption are existential issues for the

human species. Science would have to address and enhance systems which work towards these aims - being a question of topics as well as of research methodology.

Regarding the panel „critical considerations with regards to science“, the speakers highlighted the importance of discussing scientific items with a broader public (MEP Marie-Hélène Aubert), the importance of establishing a science of the organism (Mae Wan Ho) and the fact, that the so called “gold standard” (randomised clinical trials (RCT) in medicine for example), on which science is measured today, lead to narrowed, mostly commercial solutions with ever more bias. Whole systems research methodology brings interesting results close to the patient and his real needs - both have to be combined.

Lastly some examples of practical research were presented how trans-disciplinary research - inclusion of the participants like farmers - is practically possible and what comes out of it - expert knowledge for example (Prof. Ton Baars). Especially in breeding the “breeders eye” - the experts view - helps to select in a quick way and is very precise. Health oriented selections become possible (Karl Josef Mueller). Food products out of these contexts show different quality in holistic picture forming methods which have - again - to be read by experts. These methods are very close to scientific validation today.

As for the European Commission (DG Research) Ciaran Mangan proposed “we are open to all kinds of research. The criteria have to be worked out, still.” Perhaps the newly established Technology Platform Organics can give the bottom for such a discussion with the Commission. MEP David Hammerstein concluded that especially from Framework Programme 5 to 7 less systems approach research seems to take place. The conference has given important impulses for EU policy makers on how to adopt different types of research methodologies for more sustainability.

Nikolai Fuchs, head of the Office Brussels of Demeter International, concluded at the end of the well attended conference that not only organic farms would need complementary research methodologies. It is a matter of sustainability as such. It will need capacity building in the Commission to deal with this wider subject, especially in the review process for funding proposals.

Mae Wan Ho, director of ISIS pleaded for Europe’s agricultural policies must rise to the challenge, to support and promote organic, localised, biodiverse agriculture that is the most effective way out of the current crisis, to deliver health, wealth, and happiness to the world’s nations. Demeter International combines 3800 certified organic farms and 550 processors and distributors in 44 countries (www.demeter.net). ISIS advises third world networks and delivers the “*Science in Society*” magazine (www.i-sis.org.uk).

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